



Loida Maritza Pérez

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The tears, when they fell, streamed so fast that Iliana did not bother to wipe them dry. Each of her reasons for returning home was shadowed by the knowledge that her sister would have preferred for her to stay away and by the sudden realization that she had returned not so much to help as to be embraced. She had wanted, more than anything, to belong. Having spent years plotting how to leave only to discover, when she finally did, that she felt as displaced out in the world as in her parents house, she had made the decision to return and to re-establish a connection with her family so that, regardless of where she went thereafter, she would have comforting memories of home propping her up and lending her the courage to confront the prejudices she had encountered during eighteen months away. Yet she could not now conceive of being able to interact with the members of her family or even making her own way through the world should she again leave the only home she knew.

— Interview in Newsday (1998)

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Quick Facts

- * Born in 1963
- * Dominican-American novelist and short story author
- * Her first published novel is entitled *Geographies of Home*

Biography

Loida Maritza Pérez was born in the Dominican Republic in 1963. At the time of her birth, the Dominican Republic was awash in political and economic chaos caused by the ruthless dictatorship of Rafael Trujillo. Though he was assassinated two years prior to Pérez's birth, the effects of his 31 year dictatorship were still being felt throughout this small island nation. Due to the economic strain, Pérez's family moved to the United States when she was three years old.

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Pérez's novel, *Geographies of Home*, follows the lives of a Dominican immigrant family who are trying to establish a home in the United States while still holding on to their cultural identity. The family faces poverty, discrimination, and all the difficulties of relocation. While trying to adjust to life in New York, the family undergoes a series of crises which convince Iliana to return from college to try to help repair her family. Iliana's sister Beatriz has disappeared, another sister named Marina is facing a violent mental collapse, one brother is cheating with another's wife, her sister Rebecca refuses to leave her sadistically abusive husband, and neither of her parents feels capable of dealing with their children's problems.

Although most critics claim that the central theme of this novel is family, the abuse that surrounds the family is what defines the characters and is the driving force of this novel. The forms of abuse that are depicted in this novel are extensive but are primarily marital abuse, abuse within a family, mental abuse, physical abuse, and sexual abuse.

Within the family the father, Papito, punishes his children physically, sometimes to an extreme. But not all of the children see this as abuse, making for an interesting position on the question of what abuse is. Is physical punishment considered abuse if it is done with the intention of correcting a behavior? Or is abuse simply abuse, no matter what the reason is for harming someone? When Iliana confronts her father about beating her as a child for no obvious reason when she was standing next to a river, his explanation suggests that he felt it necessary to use physical punishment in order to protect his children; "You were headstrong even then. I had to teach you a lesson so that you'd learn to be afraid. Without fear, anything could've happened to you. It was my responsibility to teach you about danger and keep you safe" (318). Pérez does not openly answer the question of what qualifies for abuse, but she uses her characters as examples of different mentalities about this question to fully explore it.

Another example of family abuse, and how abuse is a cycle, is shown through the character of Rebecca (one of Papito's children). Rebecca was physically punished by her father as a child, she then married a man who physically abused her, and she then in turn abused her children. In the following quote, Aurelia confronts the her daughter Rebecca about the choices she makes, because Rebecca feels that her parents set her up to be a person who is drawn to abusive relationships.



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In addition to exploring commonplace topics in ethnic American literature such as the protagonist's cultural identity and the generational conflict between immigrant parents and their American-born children, *Eating Chinese Food Naked* deconstructs several persistent stereotypes of the “docile” and “overachieving” Chinese American (Wu). Ng's portrayal of class difference between Ruby and her family and her focus on the financial struggles of the Lee family counters the widely accepted myth of Asian Americans as a ‘model minority’ whose alleged exceptional financial success on the US job market is often quoted to exemplify the endless possibility for ethnic minorities to live the American Dream of upward mobility. Ruby, her brother Van and her sister Lily, by no means correspond to model students, a stereotype that singles out Asian Americans as the most successful students at Ivy League colleges in the US. Complicated and at times distorted relationships within the family become obvious in Ng's candid depictions of the hardships and internal conflicts of Chinese American families who are often labeled as family and group oriented.

I've had enough of being blamed for your [Rebecca's] bad choices. It was you who stayed with Samuel although he'd broken half your bones. It was also you who took up with Pasion and stayed with him although he's had you living in filth since the first day. And since you have conveniently forgotten, he had already set about trying to kill you before any of your children were ever born. So don't you dare blame your life on them. You are responsible for it, Rebecca. Not your children, and definitely not me. I may have made mistakes, but I refuse to take responsibility for yours (199).

Pérez extensively explores how abuse is often a cycle, but she never clearly asserts blame to any one character and lets the reader decide for themselves where the responsibility lies.

Marina is an example of abuse that occurs outside of the family sphere, but the destruction that is caused by the rape affects the family as well. Marina was raped and suffers severe emotion damage, which she exhibits both physically and mentally. Physically she begins to see schizophrenic visions, including spiders that she feels she must burn off the walls, she sees her attacker in her closet, and she attacks Iliana when she suspects that Iliana is secretly a man.



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She also physically abuses herself as a result of this emotional trauma by trying to commit suicide, and in one telling scene, after she believes that her rape has happened again in her bedroom, she harms herself without even registering it by trying to scrub herself clean in the shower.

Filled with self-loathing, Marina turned on the hot water in the shower . When its steam obliterated her image in the mirror, she collected a razor , a can of Lysol, several Brillo pads from under the sink, and stepped into the stall. . . .She meticulously scoured herself with Brillo, lingering behind her knees, under her arms, in the inside of her elbows. When her skin was blistered and she could stand the pain no more, she stepped from the stall and sprayed herself with Lysol (19).

Iliana was also abused within and outside of the family. She is verbally teased by her family, friends, and sometimes strangers for looking and acting masculine. This constant teasing causes Iliana to be insecure and try to conform to feminine stereotypes in order to be accepted. For example, Iliana decides to wear a skirt in order to impress her family, but doesn't realize that the teasing is simply an insecurity of hers that they found emotionally affects her, and changing the way she looks will not stop them from picking on her.

Iliana backed away from the mirror. She tried to shake off her lingering unease as she tucked her breasts into a bra, stepped into a pair of panties and a floor-length skirt, slipped on a billowing silk shirt. She had carefully selected these garments-keeping in mind that she needed to please her parents as well as her sisters who habitually accused her of dressing like a man (260).

Iliana's character shows how emotional abuse can be very powerful on a person's self perception, just like physical abuse.

The women who are abused in this novel exhibit a form of self-abuse, or self-hatred, because of their reactions to being physically abused, and this is particularly well explored in the characters of Rebecca, Iliana, and Marina. Internalizing external abuse shapes most of these characters and forms their self identity.



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A leading cause for Pérez's exploration of abuse and its implications may be her family's suffering under the abuse of the Trujillo dictatorship in the Dominican Republic. During General Rafael Molino Trujillo's reign from 1930 until his assassination in 1961, he expanded the economy, eliminated foreign debt, enhanced public utilities, expanded the public education system, and reduced the illiteracy rate. These changes, however, did not come without a price.

Under his authority, the people of the Dominican Republic were subject to persistent poverty and repressive control over their daily lives. Most of the Dominican people were forced to silently watched as Trujillo took over plantations and business, established monopolies, and embezzled national funds, all the while living in fear of being a victim of one of his government appointed assassinations if they spoke out against his abuses. Trujillo's abuse was not exclusive to his own people, as he ordered the slaughter of over 20,000 Haitian squatters on Dominican land. These brutal atrocities brought forth economic sanctions from the Organization of American states, which plunged the countries already destitute people into even further poverty. While Trujillo may be remembered for the positive changes he made within the country, it is more likely that he is remembered for his atrocious abuse of power and the economic, political, and physical abuse he exercised upon his own people.

It is possible that Pérez embodies and personifies this abuse in various characters in her novel. The extreme physical abuse enacted by Papito's repressive control over his children, Marina's self abuse and mental degradation caused by the abuse she was subject to. All can be seen to stem from the historical events that Pérez and her family were witness and subject to under the Trujillo dictatorship.

Since abuse is such a prevalent theme, most readers cannot help but hope to see some resolution of this theme. Resolution of abuse, or growth as a result of being abused, is a typical characteristic of novels that are in this genre, such as *The Color Purple* or *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. Because of this expectation, most readers want and expect the characters to come out of these abusive conditions stronger, or at least with the knowledge to not reinvest in similar abusive situations. Pérez does not give the reader this sense of inner resolution that we would expect. One character is placed into a mental health institution, but that character is not self-admitted, therefore the reader still does not feel that the character has really changed. The capacity to grow from the abuse is available, but the hope that the character will voluntarily make this change is limited.



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The two characters that do seem to change throughout the novel are Aurelia and Iliana. Although Pérez makes the deliberate claim that her novel does not have a protagonist, it could be argued that either of these characters could be the protagonist because they are not static and a sense of progress is gained from them. Iliana works out the abuse that was inflicted upon her by her father with her father and is able to resolve that relationship. Aurelia also changes from the beginning of the novel because she goes from being an observer in her family to taking active responsibility in the lives of her children. One of the ways that she does this is by going back to the beliefs of her mother, and her mother's ancestors, and using Santeria (a part of herself that she had rejected at the beginning of the novel) to help her family.

Though Pérez says that this novel is not autobiographical and does not admit to the idea that the protagonist in her novel is a representation of herself, one cannot help but draw numerous similarities between the two. Both her character and Pérez's families immigrated from the Dominican Republic to New York, both have expressed difficulty forming a cultural and self-identity, and both were women who were college educated. Pérez does acknowledge these similarities and the importance of her family's own struggle to establish a home in the United States, just as the characters in her novel struggle to do the same.

Much like in *Geographies of Home*, Pérez's own family settled into a diverse region of Brooklyn, New York where she was forced to confront both her black and Latin ancestry. She struggled to identify herself with either of the groups, who were not at all eager to accept both parts of her identity. Iliana faces this same struggle in the story, and reminisces about her self identity in the novel:

"Iliana remembered as well how, during her years in that apartment on Pennsylvania Avenue and in that neighborhood where few other Dominicans had resided, she had yearned to look like the Puerto Rican or black American girls so that she could be easily identified as belonging to either group. She would have traded her soul to have the long, straight hair and olive skin of her Spanish-speaking friends or to wear her hair in cornrows and have no trace of a Spanish accent like the Johnson girls down the street. She used to hate the question 'Where you from?' because few of her classmates knew of the Dominican Republic and several of her black friends assumed that she claimed to be Hispanic in order to put on airs" (190).

This novel may not be autobiographical, but the Pérez's own life experience is almost certainly an influence, and the connections between Pérez and Iliana are apparent.



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Pérez's immigration experience naturally inspires her writing, but the path to becoming the writer Pérez is today did not begin with aspirations of writing. Her love of science during her early school years helped form a vision of becoming a doctor. However, during junior high she read *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide, When the Rainbow Is Enuf*, by Ntozake Shange, and afterwards was moved by this introduction to literature and life artfully presented by a person of color.

Pérez attended Cornell University in Ithaca, New York where she majored in English, despite the urgings of her parents to study something "legitimate," which meant becoming a doctor or a lawyer. But Pérez had a yearning to express herself, which she was not able to do well enough with her first passion, painting. While in college, Pérez's roommate suggested she read Gabriel Garcia Marquez's masterpiece, *100 Years of Solitude*. After reading this novel Pérez felt opened to the freedom of literature, as she describes "It allowed me to be able to explore my own voices and perceptions. It lent me some sort of legitimacy" (Garza, 3).

In one of her interviews Pérez describes writing in her small apartment in the East Village of New York City, where she would gaze through her window to a lone tree in a world of concrete, which she felt symbolized the feelings of isolation and loneliness she partners with the other themes presented in her writing. Pérez thoughtfully explores the trials and hardships presented to immigrant families, and their struggle to discover and/or maintain their identity in a society that forces them to assimilate. As Pérez summarizes, "What is home when the country you've left behind is no longer home -- because you've changed and so has the country, is home a familial space? An emotional space? A physical space? It's different things to different characters. I don't even know what home is yet" (Garza, 3).

Pérez won numerous literary grants and awards prior to her first novel's publication. In 1991 she was awarded a New York Foundation for the Arts grant, in 1994 she earned a Ragdale Foundation grant, and in 1996 Pérez was awarded a Pauline and Henry Gates fellowship.



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Pérez's debut novel, *Geographies of Home*, which originally started as a short story, was published in 1999. That same year she was acclaimed by *El Diario* as one of the fifty most important Latinas in the United States. *Geographies of Home* was greeted by an overwhelmingly positive response by critics, particularly for Pérez's strong Caribbean influence in the novel and the sensitive representation of the difficulty of immigration. Pérez examines in her novel the way that a sense of cultural and personal identity can shift depending on the location, because her characters experience different challenges in the United States versus the Caribbean. The characters then reevaluate themselves based on these challenges and how they responded to them.

Pérez investigates numerous ideas and themes within her novel, the principal themes including family and identity, and the critics have drawn different views and ideas of what *Geographies of Home* is attempting to convey. Some contend that the overwhelming message of the novel is of maintaining a sense of cultural identity after immigrating. One critic uses an interview with Pérez to support this claim, "We must learn from and be sensitive to each other's complex histories, and the amount of pain that still exists in the national psyche of both cultures. We should refuse to be so easily fragmented -- even by the unfortunate judgments some of us make about each other" (Esdaille, 3).

Critics have also picked up on Pérez's use of the supernatural; and though they have mixed reviews regarding its use, the consensus is that it successfully adds a unique thread of spiritualism and cultural belief to an already intricate story. As one critic describes, "[t]he prominence of spiritualism gives the book an illusive, haunting quality science fiction lovers will appreciate. This novel is not always pleasant, but it's certainly a captivating tale of the resilience of the family and the soul" (Robinson). Yet another critic views the supernatural as a means to an end, "Paranormal phenomenon competes with insanity that elevates this from a depressing litany of woes into a song of praise for the resilience of love and family" (Esdaille, 2).

Though the reviews from critics are resoundingly positive, their assessments of the novel often focus on some minor faults. Even so, the negative criticism still lends praise to the uniqueness of the novel; "This novel won't satisfy readers in search of a traditional plot. *Geographies of Home* reads like an intricate character analysis of members of a complicated family" (Robinson, 2). The same critic subsequently praises the author, stating, Pérez does two things very well: creates complex, authentic characters and tells their stories with rich inventive language.



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The story is packed with common contemporary experiences: racism, racial identity crises, poverty and sexism” (Robinson, 2). With the only criticism of the novel being its uniqueness, Pérez’s first novel has effectively swept the critics away in her landslide of creativity, wit, and originality.

Even with the myriad of themes Pérez explores, one of her central goals is to relate the challenges immigrants face in America. One critic cites Dominican-American author Julia Alvarez as praising Pérez for “addressing the heart of darkness at the center of the American dream” (Garza, 2). While she explores and expresses immigrant hardships and the attempt to maintain identity, heritage, and family, she has effectively produced a novel that explores persons of all racial and ethnic descents to discover their identity and to eventually, find home.

In an interview on her publisher’s official website, Pérez directly addresses the themes that critics contemplate so extensively in her novel, stating, “Ultimately, these issues pertain to the human condition: our need to belong and be accepted; the contradictions inherent in all of us; our attempts to do the best we can even in the worst of circumstances; our desire to guide our children and the risk of making mistakes along the way; our wondrous ability to sometimes understand and forgive; and our faith in a force greater than ourselves” (Penguin, 4).

Pérez has given hints that her greatly anticipated follow-up novel may take place in the Dominican Republic, which she has traveled extensively as an adult. Pérez currently resides in New York City.



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